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College Student Development and the Hook up Culture

Undergraduate relationships and peer culture reflect trajectories of growth and change in late adolescence and early adulthood. Acknowledging that human development is situated in social, cultural, and historical contexts, it is nevertheless possible to identify patterns of developmental change that are normative for BC students. For a young adult in a residential university, the undergraduate years comprise one of the most intense periods of personal and intellectual growth in the entire life span. Separated from parental authority and childhood labels, undergraduates find both freedom and pressure to define themselves, establish relationships with others, and make meaning in increasingly complex ways.

The full-time, residential college experience is a prime example of what Erik Erikson (1968) termed a “psychological moratorium,” a period of role suspension removed from the demands of parents and highly supervised activities while not yet restricted by the responsibilities of earning a living or maintaining one’s own family. In her sociological study of hooking up, Kathleen Bogle (2008) underlined Erikson’s point by making the case that colleges are ideally set up to enable casual sexual activity. Extensive unsupervised free time, along with a dense population of same-age, similar peers makes it possible for college students to define a collective peer culture of physical intimacy and sexual experimentation without apparent consequences. In contrast, Bogle found, college alumni lack undergraduates’ free time, ready access to peers, and feelings of safety with same-university classmates and common housing arrangements. Alumni largely discontinue hooking up because of this radically different post-college environment. Their actions also reflect a perception that the moratorium is over: college graduates perceive their actions now count toward desired adult goals of committed long-term relationships and marriage.

Identity Development

Eric Erikson’s early conception of the developmental tasks of adolescents and young adults still holds today: undergraduates are preoccupied with issues of identity and intimacy. Arthur Chickering expanded Erikson’s work with a more differentiated set of developmental tasks that lead to the achievement of a stable, integrated adult identity (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). The extensive empirical research on Chickering’s “vectors of identity development” confirms that students do not arrive in college with full mastery of these tasks. Three component vectors of identity development are particularly relevant to student participation in the hooking up culture: developing competence,

moving through autonomy toward interdependence, and developing mature interpersonal relations.

Competence, according to Chickering, consists of intellectual, manual, and social proficiency as well as an overall sense of competence. In the arena of relationships and sexuality, college students need intellectual skills to understand complicated situations, read mixed messages, and make sound decisions. Manual competence encompasses health and wellness, including care of the body, habits of alcohol use, and practices of safe sex. Social competence concerns the ability to make and maintain friendships, communicate effectively, and function well in social situations. College students need social competence for technologically-mediated communication as well as face-to-face interpersonal situations. Clearly, all three aspects of competence influence students' ability to make healthy decisions and establish strong connections to others. Difficulties in any of these areas can lead to feelings of lack of competence, including poor self-esteem. Competence and sense of competence affect students' sexual experience, according to Lambert, Kahn, and Apple (2003), who found associations among undergraduates' level of assertiveness and confidence, perceptions of social pressures, and unwanted sexual encounters. Laura Session Stepp (2007) illustrated an arena of limited social competence in students' use of instant messaging, text messages, and Facebook "to make bold suggestions at the last minute and terminate further relationships without the emotion of face-to-face conversation" (p. 46).

The development of autonomy is another core developmental task affecting undergraduate relationships. Social pressures are especially important in understanding undergraduate peer culture. Having reached its height in the high school years, peer identification remains central to most college students. Astin's (1993) large-sample longitudinal studies of college students showed that the peer group is the single most important influence on the academic and personal development of undergraduates. Students whose identity is closely connected with a peer reference group are unlikely to resist the perceived group culture or to see alternative routes to status and belonging. In campus peer culture, for example, women frequently measure status through their ability to attach a highly attractive male partner (Holland & Eisenhart, 1990; Knuth, 2008). Defining social standing in terms of sexual attractiveness favors participation in whatever visible social arena predominates on campus. In a recent open conversation sponsored by the BC Women's Resource Center, undergraduate women said they participated in hooking up because that was their only avenue to attract highly desirable males.

The importance of conformity to peer norms is underlined by research findings that undergraduates behave according to how they perceive their peers are acting. These perceptions are frequently mistaken, resulting in "pluralistic ignorance" about actual group behavior. Numerous studies have shown that students overestimate the prevalence of both binge drinking and hooking up among their peers. (Chia & Lee, 2006; Lambert et al., 2003). The connection between individual actions and (mis)conceptions of peer behavior highlights how conformity shapes student choices. Campus interventions aimed at helping students make more realistic assessments of peers' behavior have shown mixed success (Scholly, Katz, Gascoigne, & Holck, 2005). In any case, such approaches

attempt to make use of the power of peer pressure without challenging students' shortcomings in developing autonomy.

The developmental task of developing mature interpersonal relationships is highly relevant to students' experience of close friendships and sexual relationships. First-year undergraduates tend to arrive in college as conformists, behaving with superficial niceness and concerned with physical appearance and fitting into the peer group. Most have dualistic views of the world, think in stereotypes and clichés, and are relatively insensitive to individual differences. At this point in development, relationships are superficial, including the possibility of infatuation, idealization, and seeing oneself through the eyes of another. Growth occurs in the direction of increased tolerance, empathy, and openness to others. Chickering defines mature intimacy as "when the relationship is valued for itself, when both people can be whole and authentic, when love and loyalty allow for growth and experimentation. This form of relating is free of roles and game playing, normative judgments, and power struggles" (p. 161). Developing mature interpersonal relationships requires time, trust, and reciprocity that are absent from typical hook ups. In fact, the hook up culture and the elements of developing mature interpersonal relationships are so different that students might be able to experience developmental growth in the area of friendships but not in intimate sexual relationships.

Sexual Identity Development

The development of sexual identity is an important aspect of overall self-definition in adolescence and young adulthood whether or not an individual is sexually active. Nearly all of the social sciences literature on sexual identity concerns the development of a homosexual identity (See Reynolds & Hanjorgiris (2000) for a review of this literature). Theories of LGBT development focus on the process of acknowledging and integrating a minority sexual orientation within a sharply homonegative society. Worthington, Savoy, Dillon, and Vernaglia (2002) produced the only full-fledged theory of heterosexual identity development, in which sexual orientation is only one component of overall sexual identity. Worthington et al. define heterosexual identity development as "the individual and social processes by which heterosexually identified persons acknowledge and define their sexual needs, values, sexual orientation and preferences for sexual activities, modes of sexual expression, and characteristics of sexual partners" (p. 510). Along with the individual process of recognizing, accepting, and identifying with these aspects of their identity, people simultaneously engage in a social process in which they identify as members of a similar group with shared attitudes toward non-heterosexuals. Factors that influence heterosexual identity development include biology, culture, one's own immediate social context and religious orientation, and socially-constituted gender norms and systems of homonegativity and heterosexual privilege.

Nearly all individuals follow dominant social expectations by beginning with an unexplored commitment to heterosexuality. Some individuals remain in this status throughout their lives, but others move to behavioral and/or cognitive exploration of their sexual identity and attitudes toward sexual minorities. Still others enter a status of

identify diffusion in which they drift without intentionality or reject social conformity for its own sake. The path to achieving a synthesized heterosexual identity is through deepening and commitment, comprising conscious and congruent views of one's own sexuality and group status.

Identity can be defined as a stable, coherent, and integrated internal sense of self. Like overall identity, sexual identity exploration is a normative part of the traditional college-age years set in motion by a combination of physical maturation and social role transitions. Society's preoccupation with homosexuality is another spur to young people's preoccupation with defining and enacting their sexual orientation as a core expression of identity. Stereotypical masculinity, in particular, requires confirmation of heterosexuality. What Bogle calls the "hooking up script" enables an arena for the individual and social processes of heterosexual identity exploration hypothesized by Worthington and his colleagues. However, the superficial and alcohol-fueled hook up culture is a poor match for the conscious reflection and consideration of alternatives that characterize the deepening of self-knowledge and the commitment to an explored self-definition that is required to achieve sexual identity synthesis.

Identity in Emerging Adulthood

The identity search that Erikson originally ascribed to adolescence now reaches far beyond the teenage years. Jeffrey Arnett (2004) argues that the core period of identity exploration and self-definition constitutes a new developmental phase: "emerging adulthood." Roughly encompassing ages 18-28, emerging adulthood is an extended moratorium in which young people postpone adult commitments such as career, marriage/committed long-term partnership, parenting, and financial independence. The period of emerging adulthood has been enabled by the availability of birth control, the sexual revolution of the 1960s, and changing women's roles. Rising levels of education and changes in labor force structures have also led young people away from early occupational and family commitments.

Emerging adulthood, according to Arnett's research, is an age of identity exploration and instability in residence, jobs, and relationships. With minimal duties to others and considerable autonomy to run their own lives, emerging adults tend to be self-focused. The period of emerging adulthood is also characterized by feeling in-between childhood dependence on parents and adult self-reliance: young people themselves define full adulthood as some future time in which they will accept full responsibility for themselves, make independent decisions, and reach financial independence. Finally, emerging adulthood is an age of possibilities, in which individuals see themselves as free from the past, optimistic about the future, and able to transform themselves.

The hook up culture corresponds closely to the developmental stage of emerging adulthood. Hooking up assumes a long period of postponing lasting commitments in the dozen or so years between the average age of puberty and first marriage. Young women and men act on messages from parents and the larger society to pursue their interests and develop their careers during the decade after leaving home. At this point in their lives,

neither women nor men typically wish to subsume their identity or compromise their achievement paths for a romantic partner. Marriage can wait, they believe. Sexual identity development also continues through one's twenties, as young people continue to explore their sexual values, needs, and preferences. As the self-absorption of emerging adulthood would suggest, Stepp found that college students choose to hook up rather than invest time in a long-term relationship because they wish to remain focused on themselves, their studies, and their career preparation. With few obligations to others, emerging adults have unprecedented opportunities for socializing with peers. Feeling liberated from the past and flush with possibilities, many undergraduates and recent alumni want to be socially active, have fun, and resist tying themselves down with one partner. Not only does a committed relationship restrict one's choices, this reasoning goes, settling down with one partner represents a frightening level of commitment for which students do not yet feel ready.

Postmodern Identity

A prolonged moratorium period can theoretically provide the conditions for successful achievement of mature identity through a process of active engagement in learning environments. However, as Coté (2006) points out, the lack of normative behaviors and organizing structures in emerging adulthood also results in an "anomic and fragmented developmental context" (p. 96) in which many young people drift without volition.

In the context of freedom without guidance, people can exercise the choice to pursue a life course totally devoid of traditional social markers, with or without exerting much mental effort, by simply selecting a number of default options now available in youth culture, by which they follow paths of least resistance and effort, as in the imitation of the latest fashion and music trends. This type of individualization is referred to as *default individualization* [italics in original] because it involves little agentic assertion on the part of the person. (p. 92).

Coté argues that the lack of collective values and future-oriented social markers results in a "post-modern identity crisis" that affects many emerging adults. Kenneth Gergen (1991; 1999) defined post-modern identity in opposition to the traditional idea of a coherent, stable, internal self differentiated from the outer world. Saturation with pluralistic ideas, lifestyles, and conflicting voices have effectively ended the fiction of a single, separate, unified self, according to Gergen. In place of a "true self" is a self that is fluid, permeable, and constructed within relationships.

Whether or not emerging adults have been exposed to the intellectual vocabulary of postmodernism, there are many indications that their peer culture embraces fluid identities. For instance, students use Facebook social networking for "playful misrepresentation" (Martinez & Wartman, 2009) in which individual profiles and representations of sexual orientation or relationship status are collectively understood as provisional and fictional. The hook up scene reflects post-modern fluid identities "associated with, among other things, superficial interpersonal displays of appearance, a lack of core character and consistency, and eschewing social commitments in favor of

contextual allegiances” (Coté, p. 109). Hooking up does not require the exploration of one’s own or one’s potential partner’s personality, loyalty to a relationship, or an ongoing commitment to another person. Bogle’s research showed the paramount importance of women’s appearance in the hook up culture where partners are chosen in public settings with little or no time to become acquainted.

Gergen theorizes that post-modern identity involves a developmental process that begins when adherence to a unified “authentic” self is challenged by feelings of dissimulating and playing roles. The strategic manipulation that results is overcome by movement into a “pastiche personality” of intentional self-presentation, image management, and response to situational cues. The achieved post-modern identity, according to Gergen, is a relational self that gives up the idea of separateness in favor of co-construction of identity with another person or group. This developmental perspective on identity suggests that the hook up scene will be particularly appealing to students who are in the process of letting go of the modernist “true” self but who have not yet constituted themselves relationally. Students whose identity is firmly modernist might avoid hooking up because it is dissonant with how they see themselves. Conversely, such students might participate with feelings of guilt or shame or redefine themselves according to their behavior. Students in the middle stages will consider hooking up to be minimally relevant to who they are, while those with relational self-definitions are likely to reject the superficiality of uncommitted relationships.

Cognitive Development

Cognitive growth is as important as psychosocial development in understanding the developmental aspects of college peer cultures. The majority of first-year undergraduates arrive in college with dualistic black-and-white thinking. The demands of critical analysis in the classroom and encounters with individual differences in the peer group present immediate and sustained challenges to dualistic thinking. Unable to maintain the naïve certainty of unquestionable right and wrong/true and false, nearly all students move into a more complex way of making meaning. William Perry (1981) calls the next phase of cognitive development “multiplicity,” in which students see the legitimacy of multiple opinions and grant that not all knowledge is certain. Unfortunately, many students stop there instead of proceeding to the realization that legitimate judgments and personal commitments can and must be made within the world of uncertainty. People who make meaning from a cognitive structure of multiplicity are increasingly accepting of others but struggle with legitimate grounds for rejecting any idea or practice, for intervening in others’ lives, for finding common ground, or for choosing among alternatives. Students who feel uncomfortable about the sexualized college peer culture, for example, tend to keep their reservations private because they wish to avoid judging others or because they are themselves conflicted about the hook up scene. Researcher Donna Freitas (2008) found evidence to support the view that undergraduates remain silent when their opinions about hooking up conflict with what they see as the dominant view. In Freitas’s study, religious students on non-evangelical campuses concealed their disapproval of the campus social scene, while evangelical college undergraduates were silent about their desire for greater sexual freedom. Of great concern is excessive tolerance that keeps

students from taking action—or even speaking out—about their own or friends’ unsafe sexual practices or sexual violence.

Harvard developmental theorist Robert Kegan (1994) suggests a related conceptualization of cognitive change that implies a somewhat different analysis of the connection between intellectual complexity and student behaviors. Late adolescent meaning-making, according to Kegan, is characterized by the ability to construct the self in light of connections to other individuals and groups. With this cross-categorical order of consciousness, students are capable of taking the perspective of another person or group, identifying with a collective, and modifying their own needs and preferences in order to sustain valued relationships and social identifications. In Kegan’s terms, the cross-categorical knower can hold points of view and personal characteristics as “objects” for analysis and conscious reflection. Mutuality, relationships, subjectivities, abstractions, and inner states, on the other hand, are embedded in the individual and unavailable as objects of reflection. In other words, cross-categorical knowers “are” their relationships.

The interpersonalism of the cross-categorical order constitutes the meaning-making structure that drives conformity. Identifying the self in terms of one’s relationships or within a given system of ideology does not enable individuals to question the origins, limits, or connections among relationships. At this point, the individual lacks a regulating system of relationships to one’s relationships, or a system of ideology in which to situate abstractions. As a concrete example, college women who have introjected the norms of society without critical awareness might say that they wish to be thin and wear Ugg boots because that is just their individual preference, without any sense of the role larger social structures and ideologies play in shaping preferences. Similarly, students who study abroad are usually amazed at the ways in which their encounters with different cultures reveal contours of their home society that they took as natural and inevitable, rather than as situated and constructed.

Students who identify with the social surround have no way of understanding that they are surrounded. When the hook up system is the dominant forum for socializing and expressing sexuality, undergraduates take the system as a given and make individual decisions about how to negotiate it. In her research on college student hook ups, Bogle found that undergraduates did not question whether the hook up system should exist, where it came from, or whether it could be changed. Also unquestioned was women’s hope that engaging in hook ups would result in a “real” relationship and men’s interest in playing the field. In her thesis research on four campuses, BC senior Mari Knuth-Bouracee (2008) found that college women are unable to articulate the social structures that enable the hook up culture or to imagine any collective action that might change the social scene. They understand the contradictions between their wish for an ongoing monogamous relationship and their participation in hooking up, but see no alternatives.

Much of liberal arts education introduces students to theory, methods, and ideology in order to develop the level of cognitive complexity that succeeds cross-categorical knowing. In systemic/complex knowing, individuals perceive the partial, situated nature of knowledge. In the relationship realm, systems knowers hold their relationships as

objects accessible for analysis and reflection in light of overarching principles that regulate the connections and conceptualize the conflicts among relationships. Student who make meaning in this way can see that campus social arrangements are not inevitable and understand some of the demographic and cultural forces that affect collective undergraduate behavior. Such a student would have a way of conceptualizing a conflict between, say, feeling indebted to have sex with a male student during a hook up and wanting to participate only as far as she felt comfortable. Most importantly, individuals who can reflect on the social surround can articulate the larger picture of the environment for themselves and others, giving rise to the possibility of collective change.

Bogle is clear, though, about the difficulties facing even those students who are able to see the system in which they are operating.

... In many ways, the hookup system creates an illusion of choice. Although students have many options about how they conduct themselves within the hookup culture, they cannot change the fact that hooking up is the dominant script on campus. An individual student may decide to abstain from hooking up altogether, but they are more or less on their own to figure out an alternative. In other words, no other script exists side-by-side with hooking up that students can opt to use instead.” (pp. 184-185)

Conclusion

College students understand and enact their relationships and sexuality within the framework of their own developmental positions. Typical undergraduate identity and cognitive development levels map closely onto the contemporary hook up culture and suggest why that culture will be difficult to change. Most undergraduates lack the mature competence and cognitive complexity to analyze and withstand normative peer behavior. The realities of postponed adult commitments, time pressure, and ambiguous social values encourage no-strings sexual experimentation and shallow connections to sexual partners. The meaning-making structure of most undergraduates is not yet sufficiently developed to reflect outside of the immediate environment in order to understand the larger forces that construct contemporary social norms. Students cannot conceptualize the campus social scene as an object of reflection.

A developmental analysis suggests that efforts to bolster identity development and cognitive complexity will influence students’ social behavior. Academic and co-curricular experiences aimed at increasing competence, autonomy, and relational skills are particularly likely to help students develop the maturity to align their actions with a strong, positive self-definition. Similarly, the achievement of complex systems thinking is both the intellectual goal of higher education and the necessary meaning-making structure for post-conventional behavior.

Student development also offers guidance in meeting students where they are. For instance, student friendships appear to fit many of the characteristics of the development of mature interpersonal relations. College environments that sustain friendships are important in helping students prepare for future committed sexual relationships. In

regard to hooking up, friendship groups and other peer subgroups are potentially arenas of conversation, resistance, and new social norms. Correcting misperceptions of normative peer behavior is another avenue for affecting students' choices that does not require developmental change. Any experiences that lead students to see the bigger social picture can lead to the realization that their campus social culture is not inevitable. Enabling undergraduates to reflect on their cultural assumptions and analyze their positionality is a crucial strategy for moving individuals toward conscious decision-making, speaking out, and collective action. Because students are developmentally unready to initiate this undertaking, faculty, staff, and alumni need to take the lead in facilitating students' conversations about the peer social scene. These conversations themselves can serve as developmentally instigative challenges to students' view of themselves and the world around them. Open (and open-minded) discussion is probably the most realistic approach to influencing undergraduates' behavior within their peer social culture.

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